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# Governance and Management of Religious Tourism in India

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Religious tourism constitutes the dominant form of tourism in India and yet little is known about how it is governed and managed. This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of governance and management of religious tourism. It first provides an overview of policy framework and governance mechanisms that are relevant for religious tourism. Then a market profile is presented to examine how the religious tourism economy intersects with the state-apparatus of policies and institutions. To better explain the complexities of religious tourism, the paper employs the axis of formal-informal economy: the informal end is where the religious tourism economy is based on the traditional practice of pilgrimage, that relies on the informal networks built around social patronage relationships between visitors and religious actors; while at the formal end, it is often the state-sponsored and/or public charitable trusts that act as corporate religious bodies for providing and organising a range of services in religious tourism. Detailed studies of two sites - Vrindavan and Shirdi - provide the empirical data. The pilgrimage-town of Vrindavan in the state of Uttar Pradesh in north India represents the former; the pilgrimage town of Shirdi in the western state of Maharashtra is an example of the latter. Vrindavan is associated with traditional religious practice and sacred geography pertaining to the Hindu god Krishna while Shirdi is dedicated to a 20<sup>th</sup> century saint, Sai Baba. Consequently, the former involves elaborate rituals and performances while the latter is fairly limited in terms of visitors' engagement, and exhibits more mass-tourism-like features. The analytical triad of religious geography - specialists - performances is used to explore the range of management systems involved in the religious tourism of the two sites. It is found that the transformations of the religious tourism economy from a traditional pilgrimage practice bring in uneasy tensions: while religious actors actively participate in promotion and management of the religious tourism economy at local levels, they hardly shoulder responsibilities of addressing the negative environmental impacts. Thus, there is often an 'institutional vacuum' in dealing with both direct and indirect impacts of religious tourism. The paper shows how the reality of religious tourism is at odds with the state's envisioned role since it largely operates beyond the state-policy framework. The paper argues that identifying the formal and informal systems in management can help to better address the multi-faceted impacts of religious tourism and contribute in developing measures for its sustainability.

**Key Words:** governance, management, religious tourism, Vrindavan, Shirdi, India, formal-informal

## Introduction

In this paper, I discuss different ways in which religious tourism operates in India. I use religious tourism as a broad term that refers to patterns of travel where visitors fulfil religious and recreational needs by visiting places of religious importance and pilgrimage sites in contemporary societies (Timothy and Olsen, 2006; Stausberg, 2011). In religious tourism, the main resources for the physical and metaphysical experience of the visitors include places of worship, temples, shrines, churches and cathedrals, rituals, festivals, performances and events (Shackley, 2001; Rinschede,

1992). These experiences, however, are influenced by the governance mechanisms and management measures that are operative in the destinations. Investigating these mechanisms and how they relate to the socio-cultural and environmental impacts of religious tourism in religious tourism destinations is the focus of this contribution.

A range of governance models for management of religious tourism are found in sites across the globe (for Mecca see Henderson, 2010; for sites in Italy see Lo Presti and Petrillo, 2010; Shackley, 2001; UNWTO, 2011). Religious tourism in India, where it largely

evolved from the tradition of pilgrimage, is no exception (Shinde, 2007; Singh, 2004). This has led to complex systems of management in religious tourism destinations (referred to interchangeably as pilgrimage sites in this paper). To unpack the complexities, I employ the formal-informal axis widely used in tourism literature (Gladstone, 2005). I refer to the informal end as the one where the religious tourism economy is still based on the traditional practice of pilgrimage that relies on informal networks built around social patronage relationships between the visitors and religious actors, including religious institutions, gurus, priests and religious functionaries. In these places, interference from formal government agencies appears to be the least. At the formal end are the public charitable trusts that act as corporate religious bodies in providing and organising a range of services in religious tourism. This system is more evident in places having a single dominant shrine as the main resource for religious tourism activities (Reddy, 2006; Patnaik, 2006; Verdia, 1982). The structure that evolves in response to the religious resources in a place also defines the scale and forms of socio-cultural and environmental impacts as will be discussed further in this paper.

To contextualise the governance and management in religious tourism using the informal-formal axis, I use two examples: the pilgrimage-town of Vrindavan in the state of Uttar Pradesh in north India represents the former; the pilgrimage town of Shirdi in the western state of Maharashtra is an example of the latter. Vrindavan is associated with traditional religious practice and sacred geography pertaining to the Hindu god Krishna (in some sense orthodox practice) while Shirdi is dedicated to a 20th century saint, Sai Baba. Consequently the former involves elaborate rituals and performances while the latter is fairly limited in terms of visitors' engagement and exhibits more mass tourism like features (Shinde, 2011).

The remainder of the paper is divided into five sections. In the second section, I provide an overview of policy framework that is relevant for religious tourism in India. The third section profiles the religious tourism market using data from different government reports. Against this backdrop, in the fourth section I explain how contemporary religious tourism is evolved from the tradition of pilgrimage in religious tourism destinations. Further nuances of religious tourism are explained via the detailed insights provided in the two cases - Vrindavan and Shirdi - representing the informal and formal modes of governance. In the fifth and final section, I assess how the existing governance

mechanisms intersect with the ground realities of religious tourism and the resultant impacts on religious tourism destinations.

### **Governance Mechanism for Religious Tourism in India – an Overview**

I begin with an overview of policy framework and governance mechanisms relevant for religious tourism. While doing so I sidestep the discussion about general policy making in the tourism sector, which has already been discussed in great depth elsewhere by several scholars (EQUATIONS, 2002; Singh, 2002).

Religious tourism has only recently begun to appear in tourism policy which itself does not have a long history. In general, tourism plans have been a part of the broader framework of the 'Five-year planning' (FYP) system at the national level. It was during the third FYP period (in 1966) that the Indian Tourism Development Corporation was established as a nodal agency to coordinate tourism activities. Subsequently, similar Tourism Development Corporations (TDC) were established at the state level. These agencies were to

*play a crucial, strategic and catalytic role in the development of tourism by setting up elaborate infrastructure for tourist services in accommodation, travel, conferences and even shopping* (Singh, 2002: 52).

After much political debate spanning decades, tourism has been listed as a responsibility of both federal and state governments.<sup>[1]</sup> The states are required to develop their own policies, products and strategies within guidelines provided by central government. Consequently, states have taken their time in recognising and declaring tourism as an industry, and therefore exhibit different stages of tourism development.

In an analysis of the national tourism policy, Singh argues that '[this] policy is, at best, relatively undeveloped' (2002: 52). The importance of domestic tourists was first recognized in the revised policy of 1992 by observing that

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1. However, there are differences amongst states regarding their willingness to include Tourism in this Concurrent List: 18 states and 6 Union Territories have supported the move, 7 states including the most popular states of Kerala, Karnataka, and Madhya Pradesh have opposed such inclusion, and 4, including the states of Maharashtra and Rajasthan are yet to confirm their stance on the issue.

*for the large number of our people who travel on pilgrimage or as tourists, facilities provided are minimal....[and that the state]...will endeavour to substantially improve and expand facilities for domestic tourists (cited in EQUATIONS, 2002: 19).*

Beyond acknowledging the significance of pilgrim flows for domestic tourism and the need for infrastructure facilities in pilgrim centres, the policy provided little in terms of guidance and support for actual improvement in those places.<sup>[2]</sup> In subsequent policies the recognition continued but without much emphasis on developing and promoting religious tourism and on realising its benefits.<sup>[3]</sup>

At the state level, the government tourism agencies have identified pilgrimage sites as repositories of religious and cultural resources and therefore began to promote them as destinations for different kinds of tourism including cultural tourism and heritage tourism. Several states including Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra have formulated specific policies towards this goal. For example, the Uttar Pradesh State Tourism Development Corporation (established in 1974) developed two main objectives for pilgrimage sites: first, to promote these as tourism destinations for both religiously inclined and 'cultural' travellers interested in seeing historical monuments, major events and festivals; second, to work with the travel industry and private tourism operators to create 'tourism circuits' that include a combination of different visitor experiences (U.P. Tourism, 2006). In particular, the policies aim to promote the tourism circuit linking Delhi (the national capital), Mathura-Vrindavan (a popular pilgrimage site [see above]) and Agra (the city where the Taj Mahal stands). The agency's emphasis is to encourage national and regional private tour

companies, tour bus operators, ashrams, and hoteliers to provide comprehensive package tours that include transport, accommodation, and visits to cultural performances and events in these circuits (U.P. Tourism, 2006).

In recent years, governments have begun to emphasize the involvement of the private sector in tourism, but, there is a major problem in realising the benefits from this due to the rigid definitions of what constitute a private sector. This is evident in Maharashtra's tourism policy where a 'Tourism undertaking' means a legal entity in the form of a registered company under the Companies Act, 1956, or a partnership firm, a Registered Trust or a legally registered co-operative society or an individual proprietary concern, engaged in or to be engaging in one or more tourism projects (DoTCA, 2006: 7). Accordingly, 'eligible units' for state recognition and assistance include:

*hotels, heritage hotels, resorts, and units registered under the B&B Scheme of MTDC, motels and wayside amenities, apartment hotels / service apartments, water sports / amusement parks, arts and crafts villages.*

The preference for formal registration seems to create a barrier for religious tourism which has a high degree of informality where maximum services – religious and non-religious – are provided through social networks and informal businesses but not necessarily through registered tourist agencies.

At the destination level, management of religious tourism and the development of the town is governed and guided by Master Plans and Action Plans. By and large, plans for these places are prepared similar to any other urban areas in terms of demands of projected resident population, land use zonings, and development control regulations (Das, 1981). It is found that the special religious character of a place is hardly reflected in such planning and implementation (Wilbur Smith Associates, 2004). Planning agencies only occasionally consider pilgrim towns as special places for heritage tourism and accordingly suggest solutions that deal with issues specific to such places (Kulshrestha, 2007), but here also the issues pertaining to high visitor influx and their impacts are seldom addressed. For instance, Shirdi's Development Plan Report of 1992 noted that

*the magnitude of increase in pilgrims itself is a very serious problems which is required to be attended to while formulating Development Plan' (Town Planning Department, 1992: 15).*

However, a floating population of only 15,000 was considered for planning and a proposal was made for

2. The central Government had proposed to allocate a sum of INR 50 million (apx US\$ 800,000) per year as central assistance to enable State Tourism Development Corporations/private entrepreneurs to set up or improve accommodation facilities, way-side amenities and transport systems at important pilgrim centres but such implementation schemes were not worked out properly.
3. The National Tourism Policy of 2002 aimed at enhancing employment potential within the tourism sector as well as fostering economic integration through developing linkages with other sectors; it has set the following vision: to achieve a superior quality of life for India's peoples through tourism which would provide a unique opportunity for physical invigoration, mental rejuvenation, cultural enrichment and spiritual elevation - DoT, 'National Tourism Policy 2002,' (New Delhi: Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Government of India, 2002, 11).



reserving 15 Hectares of land for accommodating this number under the designated use of 'public and semi-public use'.

Another policy framework introduced in recent years to address planning issues in pilgrimage-towns is the establishment of Urban Development Authorities that are mandated to prepare a structural and regional plan for a much larger area surrounding the pilgrim-town. For example, in 2009 'Shirdi Urban Development Authority (SUDA)' was constituted with an area of 106.12 Sq kms in and around Shirdi (Urban Development Department, 2009: 5). Such measures, however, owing to their constitution and political issues of representation, remain on paper. Rather than any major structural and infrastructural improvement for religious tourism, they fuel speculative real estate development in such destinations (Jha, 2007; Shinde, 2012).

This brief review of policy frameworks suggests that these are not well-conceived and applied sufficiently in most pilgrimage towns, which are left to themselves when it comes to management of religious tourism and its impacts. This presents a curious case when considered in the context of the religious tourism market, where these places continue to attract the maximum visitor flows, as the following market profile reveals.

### Profiling the Religious Tourism Market

In this section, I present a market profile of religious tourism using the data that are available through studies conducted at national, state, and local level. It is important to note that these data are fragmented, but, can be considered indicative for sketching the contours of religious tourism.

One of the earliest reports that drew attention to the significance of religious tourism at national level is a survey conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) in 2002.<sup>[4]</sup> The data are over a decade old but still relevant for their indicative value in pointing to the overlap of the religious and recreational motivations and behaviour of visitors in

religious tourism - something that has increased in subsequent years. In the report, the ranking of major places by domestic tourists suggests that of the 47 most frequented sites, 19 were religious and pilgrimage sites, 10 were hill-stations, seven were metropolitan cities, six had some heritage related attractions, two were beach related and the remaining were popular for cultural activities such as festivals, performances, etc. Within the top ten destinations eight were pilgrimage sites. In terms of volume, 64% of travellers visited pilgrimage sites, 18.5% visited metropolitan cities, 11.2% visited hill stations, and 6.5% were at heritage related sites, while only 1.6% had been to the beach. In terms of motivation and purpose, the survey found that social visits were about 60%; travel for explicitly religious and pilgrimage purposes was 13.8%; business and trade accounted for 7.7%, followed by leisure and holiday travel at 6.0% of the domestic tourist flows. Given the composition of social life in India, it must be noted that social visits by their nature may involve attending religious functions and travel to pilgrimage sites. Thus, at the national level, religious travel and social visits constitute the bulk of domestic tourism (Singh, 2002).

Some insights about religious tourism at the state level can be gleaned from state-specific studies - such as the one conducted for Maharashtra by AC Nielsen ORG-MARG (2010). In this study 12,938 respondents were surveyed at 147 tourist destinations across the state. The study estimated that of the 11.47 million annual tourist/visitor arrivals, 98% (11.26 million) were domestic tourists, and of these domestic visitors 25% visited Mumbai - the capital city.<sup>[5]</sup> It seems unsurprising that eight of the top 20 destinations were in Mumbai (and there was one temple on the list). But more importantly, 10 out of the remaining 12 sites in the state were religious/pilgrimage sites; topping the list was Shirdi, a site dedicated to Sai Baba, an early 20th century saint (accounting for about 8 million visitors). Bus was the most widely used mode of travel (74%) within the state and train for out-of-state travel (55%). More than one-third of visitors stayed with

4. NCAER for the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Government of India conducted the Domestic Tourism Survey in 2002-2003. It surveyed 800 000 households across the country in December 2002. The main objectives of the survey were to estimate the total number of domestic tourists by different purposes of travel and to estimate the total magnitude and patterns of tourist expenditures.

5. Amongst visitors, 26% respondents cited social visits as their purpose of travel, 23% visited other places for education and training, while recreation was only 13%. Although only 10% of visits were categorised explicitly as 'pilgrimage / religious' this may not be a correct representation. This is evident from the other data where most frequented destinations are pilgrimage / religious sites and therefore the 26% of social visits should be added to get the overall picture. Close to a quarter of respondents had gone to major cities for education / training. All this put together means that leisure continues to occupy the minimum share.

their 'friends and relatives' followed by the 24% who stayed in 'non-star' hotels (more than 85% of accommodation units fall under the 'non-star' category). Less than 1% stayed at pilgrim-lodges (dharamshalas) and the number was even smaller for temples. This distribution is to be expected given that the purpose of travel for a large proportion of tourists is social visits. In terms of accommodation, outside the metropolitan areas of Mumbai and Pune, the pilgrimage site of Shirdi tops the list with regard to number of hotel units and rooms. Thus, if we exclude Mumbai (as a capital city through which maximum travellers pass), the state level data from Maharashtra resonate with the national level scenario in terms of distribution of trips and other characteristics of domestic tourism in which religious tourism dominates.<sup>[6]</sup>

The significance of the religious tourism market at the destination level can be seen from a study that profiles five popular tourist destinations. This study was conducted for the Ministry of Tourism by consultants GfKMODE (2010) (referred to as GfK study hereafter) in five states, to identify infrastructure gaps in the tourism sector. In the study a total of 2587 tourists (including domestic and international) were interviewed across five destinations: Kullu-Manali (a hill-station in Himachal Pradesh); Guwahti including Kaziranga (a wild-life sanctuary in Assam); Badami Pattadakal (an archaeological and heritage site in Karnataka); Nanded (a pilgrimage site in Maharashtra); and Chitrakoot (a religious and heritage site in Madhya Pradesh). The inclusion of two pilgrimage sites for detailed assessment indicates the importance of religious travel in domestic tourism and for the Ministry of Tourism. The report found that about 95% of the trips were self-organised with help of friends / relatives and around 60% of respondents travelled with family members. While 45% tourists were day-trippers, of those who stayed overnight, close to 60% were in pilgrimage sites. The study also reported on the rise of the hotel industry in the pilgrimage sites.

This brief review of reports firmly establishes the following characteristics of domestic religious tourism:

- a) social visits, and religious and pilgrimage travel continue to be the main type of tourism

contributing to almost 70%-80% of domestic tourism flows;

- b) pilgrimage sites remain the most frequently visited sites besides major capital cities (for obvious reasons of being connecting and commuting nodes);
- c) surface transport through bus and trains remains the most important mode of transport;
- d) there is increased same-day travel via privately owned and hired cars;
- e) the preference for organised package tours and stay in luxury hotels is increasing.

It is apparent that policy is geared to promote religious tourism but its goals and strategic directions do not appear consistent with the ways in which the religious tourism market seems to operate. Moreover, in both market studies and policy frameworks, the religious tourism that is reported, refers primarily to 'formal' tourism units and this leaves a large section of domestic tourism including religious tourism out of the discussions. Reports do not take into account the significant role played by social networks and enterprises in providing a large bulk of tourism services in religious tourism and whose services would generally be termed as informal (Gladstone, 2005). For instance, accommodation for guests is made available by religious gurus and priests in ashrams, dharamshalas, and guesthouses and also by friends and relatives in their homes and thereby do not count as relevant for tourism; visitors use religious services provided by religious actors with strong socio-cultural and religious ties. The pronounced informality in religious tourism generally remains unaccounted for in formal reporting. While market reports observe the rise of 'leisure' dimensions there is negligible explanation about how religious tourism in a destination operates and what actually happens during visitation to such sites. The next section offers insights into the structure and nuances of the religious tourism industry as it has evolved from a long pilgrimage tradition.

### **Religious Tourism Evolved from Pilgrimage Tradition**

Religious tourism is considered by many scholars as something that has evolved from pilgrimage as a form of travel and therefore it may best be explained by referring to the ritualistic tradition of pilgrimage. The 'sacred complex model' developed by Vidyarthi (1961) is widely used to explain pilgrimage in Hindu

6. Similar findings are also found in the state of Andhra Pradesh where 'the primary reason for high volume of tourist traffic is the location of Tirupati in the state'; Tirupati is one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in India with more than 24 million annual visitors recorded in 2002 (MARCH, 2006: 22).

tradition (Dubey, 1995; Morinis, 1984). This model involves three analytical categories:

- sacred geography,
- sacred specialists, and
- sacred performances.<sup>[7]</sup>

Sacred geography refers to the physical ensemble of a pilgrimage place that includes features such as river, trees, and ponds marked by shrines for particular deities, sanctified artefacts and objects, and temples. While the journey and routes are important, legends and stories connected to these places are equally important in realising the sacredness and religious importance. In order to do so, devotees are often required to perform pilgrimage rituals in their correct style with assistance from a variety of sacred specialists that include priests, religious gurus, monks and ascetics. All these are religious occupations which involve direct or indirect guidance, temple worship, counsel, and provision of lodging and boarding facilities for pilgrims. Sacred performances include a range of rituals that pilgrims believe they should participate in either as obligatory or as something that helps them to transcend from the material world to the divine world or to possibly tap into the powers of the divine world. These include temple rituals (daily and seasonal), processions, festivals, feasts, religious sermons and religious conferences. Of these, the divine sight of the deity (darshan) is of utmost importance for the devotees. These religion-based activities form the basis of socio-economic relationships between sacred / religious specialists, residents' communities, and pilgrims in constituting the religious tourism economy.

All three analytical categories of the sacred complex vary considerably across Hindu sites in India (Bhardwaj, 1997; Singh, 2006) but the model still offers a range of interpretations relevant for religious tourism. With new patterns of visitation, the triad of geography - specialists - performances may witness different kinds of transformations. For instance, new transport modes (car, bus, train) influence how one travels through the sacred landscapes. Some performances may be abridged for the time that is available during visits. The specialists, however, play the most important role in mediating through

performances and landscapes and as such exert more influence on the experience of the place and managing the religious resources in the economy. They desire large influxes of visitors for economic growth but the visitation also induces several kinds of social-cultural and environmental impacts in destinations.

The central question of this paper is: what kind of governance mechanisms exist for managing visitor flows and their impacts? To find answers for this question, I now proceed to the two examples - Vrindavan and Shirdi.

## The Two Destinations

### Vrindavan

Vrindavan is a centre for all ritual practices and performances related to Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu. Sacred to Hindus, Vrindavan continues to attract devotees across the country and globally - at an estimated 6 million visitors every year (Shinde, 2007). It is located in what is called as the 'Golden Triangle for Tourism' in north India - 150 km south of New Delhi, about 50 km north-west of Agra (where the Taj Mahal is located), and 14 km north of the pilgrimage centre of Mathura.

Vrindavan along with its twin city Mathura, believed to be the birthplace of Krishna, forms the centre of a pilgrimage landscape known as Braj; the geographical features of the region including river, hills, lakes and forests are connected with stories from Krishna's legend. This landscape was established in the 15th century by leading Vaishnava gurus of the bhakti movement (devotional worship) such as Vallabhacharya and Chaitanya and their disciples as they formulated the routes, itinerary and format of pilgrimage in this landscape and devised the rituals and performances central to Krishna worship (Entwistle, 1987).

The devotional practices of visitors arriving in Vrindavan include visiting various shrines that mark the sites and events of significance related to Krishna's life, seeing and beholding the image of the idol (darshan) and celebrating them in the temples through a set of rituals that replicate the daily routines from Krishna's life, listening to or reciting stories from the Bhagavatapurana (an epic that describes the life of Krishna and all the legends associated with him), and performing poetry, art, dance, song, and drama dedicated to Krishna's glory.<sup>[8]</sup> A special feature

7. Many scholars have interchanged sacred with 'religious' in their analyses as they argue that religious frameworks largely define what is sacred in Hindu traditions see D.P. Dubey, *Pilgrimage Studies: Sacred Places, Sacred Traditions* (1995) or Morinis, *Pilgrimage in Hindu Tradition: A Case Study of West Bengal* (1984).



amongst these practices is the Braj-yatra where visitors undertake circumambulation of the landscape of Braj with a belief that they can experience the divine presence of Krishna in these places.<sup>[9]</sup> These yatras are organised by religious gurus but funded by collective sponsorships and voluntary contributions of participating patrons and devotees.

A large proportion of the pilgrimage economy engages four sets of actors bound by patronage relationships that are often hereditary and referred to as *jajmani*: leaders of religious sects, ritual priests, auxiliary service providers, and devotees. As per the normative practice, the hegemonic position of religious leaders is occupied by *goswamis* who own and manage temples, provide spiritual counsel for their followers, and perform rituals and devotional practices based on the loyalty and financial support from their followers. The priests who provide ritual services, lodging and boarding and act as guides to visitors in exchange for a fee or donation are colloquially known as *pandas* (Parry, 1994, Entwistle, 1987). They represent a significant proportion of the local population that depends directly on the pilgrimage traffic. However, they do not occupy a significant place in social hierarchy and their patronage relationship with visitors is not as strong as that between the *goswamis* and their followers.

Patronage relationships are also formed through charitable trusts. At least two distinct types are found: private and public trusts. Most religious gurus have established private trusts with endowments and donations they have inherited and the purpose of their trusts is explicitly religious. Constituted mainly by family (and extended family) members, these trusts offer their religious services including visit to the

temples, organising of feasts, sermons and discourses, and performances including *katha* and *ras-lila* and maintain their religious establishment including temples and ashrams where they provide lodging and boarding facilities. Several trusts also maintain kitchens to provide meals every day for religious mendicants and poor people. Their significance in religious tourism cannot be underestimated: from 12 *dharmshalas* (pilgrim-lodges) during the 1960s, the number has increased to over 50 *dharmshalas* and 90 ashrams in 1995 (Goswami and Chaturvedi, 1995) and more than 400 as estimated in 2005 (Shinde, 2008).

With heavy and frequent influx of visitors, the religious tourism economy as it has evolved from the tradition of pilgrimage in Vrindavan continues to thrive. This is illustrated in the findings from the fieldwork conducted by the author in 2005 which involved participation in performances and rituals and a survey of visitors.<sup>[10]</sup> A summary of findings specific to day-trippers and weekend visitors revealed that up to 80 percent of respondents were regular and repeat visitors: one-third of regular visitors came at least once or twice each year and one respondent visited every month. Seeking *darshan* of Krishna idols at different temples was the main motive for travel but visitors engagement varied: about 20 percent attended the ceremonial prayers (*aarti* and *puja*) performed at temples during different times of the day; 50 percent of those visiting the temple did not wait to attend the worship rituals (*aarti*), possibly due to long queues and urge to see more temples, nor intended to perform any specific pilgrimage associated rituals. Less than 10 percent of the respondents had performed the customary circumambulation (*parikrama*) of

8. **Katha** involves telling stories about Krishna's life. Professional storytellers describe the exemplary morality and ethical behaviour of renowned Krishna devotees and Vaishnava saints, and of rewards bestowed by Krishna in response to acts of unconditional love and devotion. **Raslila** is a form of folk theatre involving performances of song, dance, and dramatic vignettes from Krishna's life in the Braj region. Although religious gurus based in Vrindavan are performers of *katha* and patronise local folk theatre groups to perform *raslila*, they rely on sponsorships from wealthy devotees and on the donations from visitors and pilgrims attending the concerts. (Entwistle, 1987).
9. The original route focused on 133 sites including forests, lakes, ponds, kunds and shrines but most contemporary versions of the Braj circuit involve visits to 73 sacred places including 12 main forests and 36 kunds but the itinerary and routes taken to complete this journey differ among Vaishnava sects (Entwistle, 1987).

10. The short questionnaire included questions regarding the frequency of trips made by the visitors, the mode of transport used for visiting Vrindavan, the itinerary, the duration of their stay, purpose of visits, and the rituals performed during the visit. The survey was conducted in the non-peak season, and involved approaching visitors at the entrance of these temples after they had completed their tour or rituals at the sites and requesting their cooperation for completing the questionnaire. Information was collected from 45 visitors at these sites. Though the sample size is small, this survey was able to identify certain distinct patterns of visitation. This survey of visitors at the entrance of major temples does not reflect the entire range of trips to Vrindavan. Many of the *pandas* that were interviewed said that many day and weekend trips made by people from Delhi, Jaipur, and Agra may involve customary visits to their family *goswamis* or gurus, initiation ceremonies for family members, or sponsoring *bhandaras* or large ritual feasts to honour pledges made to particular deities or for other important events in the religious calendar.



Vrindavan. Respondents offered two reasons for coming to Vrindavan, the first being that Krishna is an important 'wish-fulfilling' God and that it was worth the effort to visit the temples where the Krishna idols were well-known for their wish fulfilling powers. The second reason is that Vrindavan is a convenient and easily accessible destination for visitors from Delhi, Jaipur, and Agra, and serves as a weekend getaway for religious and leisure activities. The itineraries of these short-term visitors reflect these reasons; a typical itinerary of visitors included the Banke Bihari temple, whose deity is popularly recognised for fulfilling the wishes of devotees, the Rangji temple for its grandeur, and the ISKCON temple for its unique 'western' appeal where western followers have become an attraction in their own right as they perform rituals in the temple.<sup>[11]</sup> In some instances, visitors included the Radharaman temple in their itinerary because of its architectural heritage and the revered goswamis. Less than 10 percent of the respondents visited five or more temples during their day or weekend trip. The average time spent by respondents in each temple was between 45 minutes to an hour. Only 5 out of the 45 respondents indicated that they used the services of pandas or local guides during their trip (Shinde, 2008). All these observations point to the fact that short-term visits now constitute the bulk of religious tourism where one can witness multiple motivations, but have limited engagement with the deity and the sacred landscape, and rely less on customary traditions and traditional religious actors.

Similar changes are also found in other spheres of the pilgrimage economy: a contemporary Braj-yatra that the author participated in serves as a good example. In this yatra, organised by a leading goswami, more than 2000 people participated. The entire yatra was accomplished in seven days by travelling in 150 cars and 10 buses. Most participants stayed in an ashram in Vrindavan that acted as the base-camp. The yatra worked on a standardised pattern: participants assembled for a buffet-style breakfast served at the ashram, then boarded the cars and buses to visit two or three sites, mainly temples and shrines – stopping at each place for about an hour. Packed lunches were served on the site. For dinner, participants returned to

ashram for dinner where the goswami cited chapters from the Bhagvata Purana and performed the customary ras-lila. This car-yatra did not follow the circuit or sequence of traditional pilgrimage: much of the journey was changed to a linear, point-to-point travel from one temple to another, conveniently accessible by motorable roads; there were no night halts or camps in any of the sites; and circumambulation of major sacred centres (parikrama) was also omitted from the itinerary. Thus, the performance of Braj-yatra as a 'car-based package-tour' changed the experience of the sacred landscape. A journey by walking through the landscape is generally considered as the main instrument for understanding the connection between the landscape and the legends associated with Krishna worship (Haberman, 1994) but those opportunities were lost in the car-yatra which induced a disjuncture between the places, their stories, and their experiences. For most participants, it seemed to be a fulfilling experience as their interest of 'sacred sightseeing' was accomplished. But there were also a few who were neither satisfied with what they experienced about the landscape nor with the travel arrangements of the tour (Shinde, 2012).

To summarise, for visitors Vrindavan is a place where Krishna can be seen and his presence and miracles experienced. But in many contemporary activities, recreational and cultural dimensions are pronounced rather than traditional religious practices (Shinde, 2012; Greene, 2005). In doing so, it is mostly religious actors who use their entrepreneurial skills and social hegemony to appropriate the religious importance and sacredness of the place for own benefits and thereby allow new groups of visitors to connect to the place. Thus, just how the experience of visitors is mediated depends on several factors besides their own motivations. The combination of day and weekend visitors and package tourists, the changing trends of religiosity as seen in decreased engagement with rituals and cramping of sightseeing of temples, the multipurpose nature of trips that fulfil religious, cultural and recreational interests for visitors and, car-based Braj-yatras, are all transforming the pilgrimage economy of Vrindavan. To cater for increasing influx, there is a proliferation of modern ashrams, luxury apartments, hotels, and restaurants and this indicates that a new kind of tourist space - associated with leisure and religious consumption - is being produced.

The poorly regulated, 'free-for-all' market has led to negative impacts on the social, cultural, religious and environmental situation, the most visible being

11. ISKCON was established in the mid-1960s as a religious movement comprising largely of devotees from North America and Europe, see Brooks, *The Hare Krishnas in India* (1992). ISKCON created its base in Vrindavan in the 1970s by building a grand temple and other religious infrastructure for its followers. The ways in which foreign devotees embrace and engage in Vaishnava ritual practices in this temple has made the temple a must-see destination for visitors.

ecological degradation. On one hand, there is rapid urbanisation both in terms of demographic change (with an increased migrant population) and conversions from agricultural to urban land uses and speculative real estate that is supposed to serve increasing visitation. On the other, this growth is not supported by necessary infrastructure and environmental services: water supply is inadequate for the increased population (of residents and visitors) (Sharan, 1995); the sewage disposal system through surface drains is near collapse (Haberman, 2006); and solid waste is a menace (FoV, 1998: 11).

The environmental problems, as much as they are related to urban expansion and visitor flows, are also related to the deeper issues of inadequate institutional arrangements that exist for the management of the environment. Most responsibility for the protection and management of the environment is to be shared amongst different state government agencies including the Department of Environment, Forest Department, Uttar Pradesh Jal Nigam, Uttar Pradesh State Pollution Control Board, and Uttar Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation. A close reading of their mandates and interviews with the officials from these agencies reveals that they work independently of each other, pursuing their own objectives and leaving out pilgrimage related environmental issues. The existing confusion regarding institutional responsibility and jurisdictional authority of individual government agencies has also created an 'institutional vacuum' which further contributes to the process of environmental degradation (Shinde, 2012: 126). However, there is a sliver of hope as a few religious gurus use their highly revered social status to drive environmental awareness; by interpreting Krishna as 'an environmentalist' and using moral and ethical perspectives, they link theology with environmental protection and management (Haberman, 2006). They also appeal to local residents and visitors by framing the responsibility for environmental protection as devotional service to Krishna (Shinde, 2011: 458). There exists a potential that the social relationships that define the pilgrimage economy may also be harnessed for a better community engagement in environmental concerns.

In Vrindavan, it is evident that informal networks promote and manage the religious tourism market without adequately addressing the negative impacts that religious tourism brings to the destination. The informality also weighs heavy due to the lack of well-defined roles and responsibilities and structured governance mechanisms that regulate and maintain the

resources in religious tourism. Some of the impacts, it is assumed, could be reduced simply by having some kind of formal institutions in place. This is the main difference in the governance mechanisms in Vrindavan as compared to Shirdi.

### *Shirdi*

Shirdi houses the shrine and tomb of an early 20th century guru named Sai Baba who lived here from c.1880s-1918. In less than a century the place has evolved into one of the most popular pilgrimage centres: the NCAER report ranked it as the 2nd most visited place in the country with more than eight million visitors annually. Located in the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, Shirdi is close to three major urban centres, namely, Mumbai (about 300 km), Pune (about 180 km), and Nashik (about 100 km). At its beginning (in the 1910s) Shirdi had about 200 houses and a population of around a thousand residents. In 2011, its native resident population was about 35,000 and the town spread over a geographical area of about 13km<sup>2</sup>.

Shirdi's growth, on one hand is due to the popularity and followership of Sai Baba; a large proportion of Sai Baba's devotees are from urban centres and often seek his divine intervention in their mundane problems (Rigopoulos, 1993) and hence a trip to Shirdi. The appeal of Sai Baba seems to be universal as he lived the life of a mendicant (fakir); was removed from any religious affiliations and is believed to continue to perform miracles for his devotees and therefore a guru who can 'be revered along with other household deities' (Srinivas, 1999: 252). Simultaneously, the town's growth is attributed to the ways the shrine and religious tourism surrounding it is managed by the Shri Sai Sansthan Trust (SSST), a public charitable trust supported by the state. The trust was formed immediately after Sai Baba's death to manage the endowments and monetary income that was donated in his name. Its structure and functioning, however, has evolved over last few decades (for a detail history refer to SSST, 2008; Rigopoulos, 1993). SSST efforts in providing infrastructure and services for the visitors contributed to the massive influx of visitors (SSST, 1999; SSST, 2008; Ghosal and Maity, 2010).

Field observations suggest that the floating population of visitors in Shirdi ranges from a conservatively estimated minimum of 25,000 daily visitors to weekend peaks of 75,000-80,000 (Shinde, 2011). Seasonal peaks of 300,000 visitors daily are experienced during the three main festivals that are

related to legends of Sai Baba: Ramnavami (March-April), Gurupurnima (July-August) and Vijayadasami or Dusshera (September-October). Repeat visitation is very high as devotees believe that darshan of Sai Baba's idol in the shrine can provide them enormous strength and that blessings received there will be miraculous. But all this happens in a small temple precinct built around the shrine and tomb of Sai Baba making the sacred territory fairly limited (i.e., an area of around 4 acres). Devotees also visit other places in the surroundings such as a mosque and a village office where Sai Baba used to stay intermittently. Many spend some time in prayer and meditation, and reading Sai scriptures. The visits often culminate in eating a blessed meal of prasada, or 'divine food' in a communal dining hall followed by purchasing of religious trinkets and souvenirs.

In terms of managing religious tourism, SSST is the main actor. It is responsible for temple administration, and lodging and boarding for visitors. SSST has built a 'Q' complex to regulate visitor flows before they reach the sacro-sanctum of the temple. The temple management department draws up the rituals to be performed daily, weekly, and on special occasions including festivals and appoints salaried priests who perform these rituals in accordance with its directives.

Rituals that incorporate the temple icon or any other 'special' pujas - which are usually more elaborate, take more time, require a temple priest and involve the use of ritual materials such as milk, ghee, sugar and so on - require a cash payment to the SSST. Furthermore, the SSST sets prices for ritual offerings, dictating the kinds of offerings devotees can make at the temple based on the amount of money spent. It has also developed a museum dedicated to Sai Baba's life and teachings, publishes literature and facilitates community worship and devotional activities.

The SSST manages lodging facilities in three locations across sixteen buildings, adding up to 812 large, family-friendly rooms that can accommodate up to seven thousand people, with additional halls that can be used as dormitories for overflow visitors. It provides free shuttle bus services between its accommodation centres, the temple zone and the dining hall. It also has plans to develop additional facilities at another two locations for 15,000 more overnight visitors. SSST is able to provide such services with help from more than 4500 employees and the income it receives from devotees as offerings (this amount was close to INR 670 million or more than US \$11 million in 2007, constituting about 70% of the total income) (SSST,

2008). In these ways, the SSST performs the role of a religious intermediary by managing interactions between the saint, his temple and his devotees.

Outside the temple, visitation patterns exhibit more tourism like features and involve several non-religious actors. Surrounding the temple precinct are about 1,500-2,000 shops that can be categorised into four types:

- small hotels providing accommodation of up to 10 rooms;
- novelties and religious trinkets (most of them related to Sai Baba such as laminated photos, lockets, picture frames, VCDs, audio CDs, images, idols etc);
- shops selling material necessary for temple worship, including garlands, sweetmeat, coconut, etc;
- eateries and food stalls (numbers ranging from 150 to 200 with most being temporary structures).

In addition, numerous hotels and guesthouses are located along the main access route to the shrine and their numbers are constantly on rise: up from the 50 odd small hotels recorded in 1990 to close to 450 in 2010. However, half of these are unauthorised and illegal. Many hotels have entered into agreements with tour bus companies to organise direct travel and accommodation packages. The smaller ones rely on commission agents to bring clients from the bus stand and railway stations to them. The largest proportions of visitors, however, are day-trippers who arrive early in the morning, either by a private vehicle or by bus and leave by nightfall.

Shirdi presents a good case of a modern religious tourism destination where contemporary patterns of religious travel are observed. SSST, with its exclusive control and administration of the shrine and its income, is the largest stakeholder in managing religious tourism that is based on faith in Sai Baba. While it has state sanction, it is also perceived as the custodian of the sacred place and therefore enjoys visitors' trust. In terms of socio-economic relations, it is apparent that in absence of a traditional religious functionary class, the SSST and the commercial network of hotels, shopkeepers and their agents perform the role of intermediaries. These interactions in Shirdi are primarily of commercial nature (as compared to the one driven by more complex unique social and cultural exchanges between visitors and religious service providers that dominate the pilgrimage economy in traditional pilgrimage sites); as one hotelier summed

up, 'visitors are customers.' Other entrepreneurial initiatives in the area exhibit the features of tourism such as offering package tours to other religious places in the vicinity such as Shani Shingnapur (a site dedicated to Shani God), Nashik (a site of the Kumbha Mela), Tryambakeshwar (dedicated to lord Shiva) and other tourism sites including the world heritage sites of Ajanta and Ellora caves. Another notable example is the creation of a new attraction, namely a water-park, which its private promoters claim is doing brisk business (personal interview with the agent selling water-park tickets). Similar to other pilgrimage sites, Shirdi has also begun to witness a growth of charitable trusts - in the last five years more than ten have established their premises here. These trusts incorporate Sai Baba's name and have been established by devotees from outside of Shirdi to provide accommodation to their patrons and members. They have started to organise their own festivals and rituals of worship, which are combinations of what is practiced in their native places with those of Shirdi. Going by such activities, it is quite possible that Shirdi is now gearing to become a multi-dimensional religious tourism site where religion and recreation can be experienced simultaneously.

Thus, in Shirdi, religious tourism exhibits some unique features: the role of 'sacred specialists' is limited and defined by the state (through SSST), sacred geography is limited to one shrine complex and so are the limited engagements and there is almost a near absence of sacred performances. However, in visitation, besides the central focus on darshan, one finds dominance of tourism-like features such as hotel stays, and more shopping and leisure activities.

With such a visitation that has increased substantially in the past three decades Shirdi has experienced rapid population growth (of migrants) and conversions of land for urban use. The hitherto rural areas that were used for agriculture and cultivation are converted into large plots and most are earmarked for construction of hotels and real estate development. Owing to the presence of SSST as the all powerful agency dedicated exclusively to the service of visitors and development of infrastructure for religious tourism, the urbanisation patterns are distributed unevenly and so are the benefits and the impacts. The town appears divided at several levels: the planned areas of SSST where it is responsible for all infrastructural provisions and environmental services for visitors, and the town of residents that continues to face problems associated with rapid urban growth and migration. A majority of

residents are not able to access basic facilities; on one hand most of them are engaged in the informal economy and as such operate from structures that are often termed as encroachments - illegal and informal (1500 such illegal constructions were recorded by the local authority). On the other hand, the local authority is not able to raise enough funds to provide services in the already dense core areas. In contrast, the structures built by SSST follow formal rules and regulations and are modern with some attention to providing a better experience of staying in Shirdi. The emphases of SSST on building hospitals, shopping malls, serviced apartments, and hotels has reinforced the image of the place as that of an 'urban city' but with a religious attraction as its centre.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The studies of Vrindavan and Shirdi draw attention to several nuances of management systems within which religious tourism operates in India. In this section, I cluster these into four thematic areas.

### *1. The transformations of the religious tourism economy bring uneasy tensions.*

Religious tourism is primarily evolved from ritual practices and performances intrinsic to traditional pilgrimages and this brings in some tensions. Such uneasiness results from the embeddedness of the pilgrimage economy, in particular religious-cultural contexts, and yet its continuous reshaping by its bearers under the influence of wider patterns of socio-economic change and market forces (Gladstone, 2005). For instance, it is necessary to understand that private enterprises can bring visitors to temples (or to ashrams) but they cannot ensure that the visit is completed as a religious practice; such a right and authority rests with religious functionaries and it is this emphasis on the 'religious' aspect that makes religious travel distinct. The basis for religious tourism continues to be rituals but paradoxically, in catering to the needs of contemporary visitors, it is likely that religious entrepreneurs transform the content, form and delivery of rituals and performances that marked the pilgrimage tradition.

### *2. Religious tourism operates beyond the state-policy framework.*

The reality of religious tourism is at odds with the state's envisioned role. In the ritualised nature of religious tourism, the focus is on the active engagement and experience that is generally mediated



and managed by religious actors. These actors, owing to their socio-religious hegemony, are adept in responding to changing expectations and market demands and turning into entrepreneurs. This business of the religious experience economy has been and continues to operate regardless of government's policies or strategies. In fact, the interventions in, and promotion of religious tourism by government agencies are perceived as violating the sanctity of the religious place and the religious experience that is being sought by visitors. For example, orthodox priests have protested the establishment of a Krishna theme park in one of the forest lands near Vrindavan (Shinde, 2008). Moreover, any efforts of the government in developing and promoting a new religious tourism attractions will yield no results unless they are sanctioned by the religious authorities. This also means that the government agencies, instead of promoting religious tourism (which religious actors do efficiently) should focus on the important challenges relating to poor infrastructure, regulation of shoddy hotels and security concerns. In particular, the last aspect has become very prominent in recent years due to spate of terror threats in pilgrimage sites (NDTV, 2010; Times of India, 2007).

**3. *Religious tourism has multi-faceted impacts that are not addressed due to an 'institutional vacuum.'***

It is evident that religious tourism causes both direct and indirect impacts due to the increasing visitor influx and expanding religious tourism economy. Direct ones are related to the use of resources and the generation of waste by visitors while they are in the site. The indirect are those related to urbanisation processes driven by the tourism economy. And yet, the existing institutional set-up at the government level is inadequate to deal with both kinds of impacts as different government agencies respond to these situations in different manners leaving a major gap in the management of religious tourism destinations. While the tourism agencies do not shoulder the responsibility to manage visitor flows as it is not in their mandate, the planning agencies seldom address infrastructural needs for religious tourism in their plans. The visitors do not constitute any electoral constituency and therefore their considerations are absent from the priorities of local government. Thus, religious tourism destinations are often plagued by systemic and structural problems with regards to governance and therefore continue to experience severe impacts on their environments.

**4. *The management of religious tourism is better explained using the formal-informal axis.***

As one identifies formal and informal systems in the management of religious tourism, several facets become self-explanatory. When there is a formal institution such as the SSST in Shirdi, it plays a proactive role in provision of infrastructure and services and overall better management. As a formal entity (trust) takes responsibility, there is regulation of visitor flows and visitors get darshan and a pleasant experience of the place which is kept clean. In an informal system as seen in Vrindavan the social networks and patronage economy narrows the interaction between the hosts and guests and carves out a micro-environment from within the public domain. In the public domain however, there is neither an overarching system of maintenance nor dedicated stakeholders that are responsible for management. It must be noted that in the formal system one finds that religious content is limited while tourism aspects are pronounced. It seems that the more formal the economy the better the management is but that may not necessarily be the case, particularly if the responsibilities are not clearly defined amongst the state agencies. For instance, the SSST works mainly within its jurisdiction and has not contributed much to address the problems experienced in the public domain in Shirdi. Other issues such as crowds, high densities, and congestion remain and hence, all religious tourism destinations need some kind of institutional structure and formal mechanisms if benefits of religious tourism are to be realised in their sustainable development.

Using two detailed studies of places that are placed along the formal-informal axis this paper has explained several nuances of governance mechanism and the management of religious tourism in India. Since most pilgrimage sites (and religious tourism destinations) possess varying degrees of informal networks and formal institutions, it can be argued that the findings from this chapter can be generalised for them as well. In the paper, the most visible environmental degradation and urban issues have been discussed but it is necessary to remember the significant religious, cultural, and social changes that increased and frequent visitation cause in a destination. These have been glossed over and need a separate paper for adequate treatment of the subject. In this work it may appear that informal means religious actors and formal means state actors but this is not necessarily so; these categories have been over-simplified to forward the necessary arguments. More in-depth research is required on the matrix of relationships and associations between the

analytical categories of formal, state, informal, religious actors. But, surely it can be said that fostering cooperation between religious actors and government agencies is a step forward in retaining traditional form, content and context of religious-cultural practices that form the basis for the religious tourism industry.

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